Dr. Nelson Interviewed on History Curriculum

By William Pannill

The History Department announced last week that it had decided to drop the Junior Independent Work program, scheduled to start spring semester.

The reasons given were a need for basic changes in the curriculum, and a lack of adequate library facilities. In order to report these changes, the Thresher interviewed Dr. William H. Nelson, head of the History Department. The text of his remarks, including some comments on Thresher editorial policy, follows.

Q: Could you comment on the History Department's decision to drop the Junior Independent Work program, originally scheduled to go into effect this year?

A: In the first place, we still plan to offer independent work of history majors, and eventually require a senior thesis of all majors in the department.

Those people now writing thesis will complete them and next year a similar program will be offered, with up to a dozen people participating. The numbers involved have not been determined, but we will keep it on about the same level next year as this. We would like to run the program as an honors program, but it will be informal, as the granting of a history degree "with honors" would require general faculty approval.

This year—a group of juniors will be invited to write a senior thesis. They will not be required to write a thesis, and no one who is not invited to write a thesis will be allowed to do so. Each person who is invited to write a thesis and accepts will be assigned to a professor, and will begin thinking about his topic, so in that sense there will be junior independent work this spring. It will not be a junior course, and no junior credit will be given for it.

Q: What were the reasons for dropping the program?

A: In a department this size (we have about 40 juniors and 40 seniors) there are two requirements for a successful independent program.

First, it's necessary to have a adequate library in terms of physical arrangements and of course money for books. We need space for people in an independent program in the library, and things like a reserve reading room, which the library doesn't have now. Although the History

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Department’s budget for books has been doubled in the last five years, it was originally very small. As new faculty are added, we have to spend more and more on books — we should be spending about four times the amount on books we are now. A person writing a thesis should be supplied with books and microfilms as he needs them, and this requires more money. And, we ran through the money allocated for this year — that is, until July, 1961 — last month. We don’t even have enough left of our allocation to buy books for the graduate students who need them.

A good senior thesis should be as long or longer than a master’s thesis, and this means books and documents and money to buy them.

THE SECOND requirement for an independent work program is a rearrangement in curriculum. The course work is now too long. It needs to be compressed into the first two and a half years, to allow the senior year to be devoted largely to the writing of the senior thesis. In the freshman and sophomore years, we need to compress the work, so that juniors will be ready to begin their independent work. As matters stand now, juniors haven’t written enough long papers to embark on a long, 20 or 25,000 word thesis. So our sophomore and junior courses need to be stepped up to the level of senior courses, and freshman courses made more intensive. Not necessarily any harder, though.

Q: Do you have any opinion on the recent Thresher editorials on the freshman history courses?

A: I am very pleased to see The Thresher showing a real, constructive interest in the curriculum.